



THE POLITICS OF CONTROVERSY, VIGILANTISM AND CENSORSHIP IN GITHA HARIHARAN'S 'IN TIMES OF SIEGE'

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Abstract

This paper analyses how the issues of the politics of controversy, vigilantism and academic censorship are dealt in Githa Hariharan's 'In Times of Siege'. In the novel, Hariharan puts the narrative of Basava in centre and implicitly refer to the fissures found in historiography and mythical narratives of India. Covering the two month of troubled times in the life of Prof. Shivmurthy, she speaks of the academic freedom in India that has often been subjected to ordeal due to certain controversial calls for censorship by diverse political, social, religious and ethnic fundamentalist organizations and communities. Given the opportunism and aggressiveness on the part of fundamentalist forces in such a situation, the creative and academic space becomes a kind of battlefield where history, art and culture are to be contested in an over-zealous fashion. 'In Times of Siege' exposes how politics of ideology has always been a potent way mobilizing un-official historical and mythical discourse and narratives prevalent in the modern day India. Political overtones of the book become evident when we find a conscientious professor pitted against the ruthless forces of bigotry, communalism, fanaticism and narrow-mindedness embodied by the group Ithihas Suraksha Manch. Their demand of the subtraction of Prof. Shiv's lesson on Basava shows how the forces of such kind aim at creating uproar by endorsing the fabricated hurt to their religious and cultural assumptions. They desire hegemony for having the remote control of the historical imagination of academic institutions to sanction a culturally-controlled version of history and myths in national curriculum.

Keywords: *vigilantism, academic censorship, historiography, opinionated-politics, historical-revisionism*



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History is the raw material for nationalist or ethnic or fundamentalist ideologies, as poppies are the raw material for heroin addiction.

Eric Hobsbawm

India's obligation towards fair and disinterested handling of the academic freedom and writings about its historical and mythological narratives has so often been subjected to ordeal due to certain controversial calls for censorship by diverse political, social, religious and ethnic fundamentalist organizations and communities. The critical thinking, reason-based writings, logical interpretations, scientific arguments and analytical scrutiny of Indian art,

culture, history, historical figures and mythical texts often result in igniting the storm of controversies. With the lack of promptness on the part of governments & courts to act on time and the unjustified intervention by the political and religious forces, the situation worsens even more as the creative and academic space becomes a kind of battlefield where history, art and culture are to be contested in an over-zealous fashion. In this context, Suketu Mehta's in his article named 'India's Speech Impediments' rightly states the alarming concerns, "Writers and artists of all kinds are being harassed, sued and arrested for what they say or write or create. The government either stands by or does nothing to protect freedom of speech, or it actively abets its suppression." In the wake of recent relentless and systematic attacks on scholarship, Dr. Apoorvanand Jha (The Professor at Delhi University) puts it as India's "Ice Age for scholarship" because even higher educational institutions, where new knowledge and intellectual faculties are meant to be freely nurtured, have been practicing the unwritten form of censorship as certain fundamentalist forces have consolidated their grip on them. There has been demand for total revamp of education through aggressive intervention. Resorting to the propaganda of homogeneous culture and religion, they silence students and teaching faculty with a cocktail of threats and mob-violence.

Githa Hariharan's "well-crafted" academic thriller, *In Times of Siege* (2003) deals with the issues of vigilantism and academic censorship in the context of fissures found in historiography and mythical narratives of India. It speaks of "an unsafe past that threatens to leak into the present" (Hariharan 136) and simultaneously, addresses "the intricacies of ideology and politics" (136) in historiography while referring to the politics of controversy, political correctness and politics of vandalism in academia. Hariharan throws light on how the conflict of intense cultural endorsement exerts the pressures on how our complexities of art, history, legends, culture and myths are to be narrated. She alarms the nation to the covert way of cultural Talibanisation that seeks to undermine its heterogeneous heritage, "little" traditions and pluralistic history by curbing the liberal space of authors, historians, artists, activists, critics and academics. The book also contextualizes the buzzing debate on the right to dissent, anti-national, and atmosphere of intolerance causing the hindrances in the way of the laissez-faire of freethinking even in premier institutions. Hariharan shows how the doctoring of history can become the subject of vibrant questioning in academic discourse where self-proclaimed "protectors of history" hunt for liberating it from the despicable legacy of "the children of Macaulay and Marx" and propose rewriting its textbooks by advancing their censorship agenda through the politics of vigilantism and vandalism. She attempts to

highlight the core issue of authentication, appropriateness and ideological creation of Indian history and its unsettled tensions arising out of the different popular and un-official versions of narratives.

This “wonderfully sly and subversive allegory” (Leavitt) by Hariharan covers the two months of troubled times in the peaceful life of a 52 years old history professor Shivamurthy who works in a fictional Kasturba Gandhi Open University located somewhere in Delhi as In charge of the BA history correspondence programme. He is unexpectedly trapped in a web of a controversy when he happens to prepare a lesson/paper module of Indian History textbook on the social reformation movement in Medieval India which has a chapter on a 12th century “poet and mystic, finance minister and political activist, man of people and man of god” (Hariharan 67) named Basava. Basava is “usually referred as Basavanna or Elder Brother Basava” (52) the one who stood against the rigid caste hierarchy and redundant rituals and social practices. Born in a Brahmin family, he rises to the position of finance minister in the court of Bijjala, the king of Kalyana. He happens to be the leading face of the Bhakti Movement in the state of Karnataka and is also revered as *Avtaar-Purush*. He is the main force behind establishing a Veerashaiva Cult (Lingayats) that mostly had the low caste people as followers. Prof. Shiv’s lesson, based on variety of sources used by the medieval historians, specially refers to the growth of Basava’s radical initiative and his confrontation with contemporary caste divisions and religious dogmas. It sheds light on the subsequent strains that occurred between the upper class - royal court officials, Brahmins and merchant- and the low-caste artists, artisans and the untouchables in the medieval city of Kalyana. Prof. Shiv’s lesson ends with the account of crisis that arises because of the tensions between the privileged upper-castes and the followers of the Veerashaiva Cult. Disowned, discarded, doubted and denigrated by his own people, Basava had to go through all sorts of trials and tribulations for his radical spirituality. With the advent of time, Basava’s followers get dispersed and he ultimately dies after deserting the city of Kalyana.

Professor Shiv endeavors for disinterested and apolitical portrayal of the much-revered saint’s life events and teachings but it accidentally “hurts the sentiments of a Hindu watchdog group” (Hariharan 53). The head of the Department of History, Dr. Sharma informs Prof. Shiv about the triggered controversy -

It seems you have implied that Basavanna’s city, Kalyana, was not a model Hindu Kingdom. It seems that you have exaggerated the problem of caste and written in a very biased way about the Brahmins and temple priests. And also

you have not made clear enough that Basavanna was more than an ordinary human being. There are people who consider him divine, you know. (53-54)

Prof. Shiv's handlings of the discourse on Basava highlights how the academic writings and texts which claim of earnest research, often become guilty of whipping up the controversies when it comes to the depiction of mythical figures, legends, historical personalities and regimes. In India, scholars' "Freedom to Write and Express" on ambiguous aspects of Indian history and legends has been controlled by the Section of IPC 295 which in actuality is the result of the colonial hangover. It criminalizes the insulting, and outraging of the religious sentiments of any community/class with hateful actions, speeches and writings. This bugbear has been instrumental in silencing the authors and publishers who dare to trespass into the territory of contentious subjects. One such controversial incident of the alleged malicious portrayal of history became the headlines when Wendy Doniger's (An Indologist at the University of Chicago in USA) well-known book named *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (2010), published by Penguin India, was slapped with a controversial lawsuit under section 295A. It was accused that her book seeks to distort and malign the historical information about the concerned community which claims of having a golden Aryan history. Four years later, the publisher Penguin India succumbed to accept an out-of-court settlement with Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (a Hindu right-wing NGO led by Dina Nath Batra) which includes the unconditional apology, immediate withdrawal of the book from the market and pulping of all the copies. In the wake of this shocking revelation Pratap Bhanu Mehta, in an article titled 'Silencing of Liberal India', held the slowness of the ineffective legal system, over-defensive publishing fraternity, weak Institutions and educators and undue political pressure to blame for this kind of "pulping of liberal India".

The novel begins in a quietly manner, totally unmindful of the conspiracy of silence. The quietness in the sedate life of Prof. Shiv is very deceptive as it symbolizes the ill-omened calm before an intensified fury. In the beginning, Prof. Shiv's lonely and sedate life hits a new change when fish-eyed Meena, the daughter of Shiv's childhood friend Sumathi comes to stay with him in the absence of his wife Rekha who is away in Seattle (U.S.A) visiting her daughter Tara. Meena gets her knee broken in an accident while staying at the hostel in Kamala Nehru University where she is studying sociology. "She is writing a thesis on what she calls women's stories, stories of women affected by the anti-Sikh riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984" (Hariharan 28). She is more like an activist and regularly attends meetings. "She talks of causes and street theatre, gender and courting arrest

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with the ease of a veteran” (31). Her activist and like-minded friends like Amar, Jyothi, and Manjar also shares her political, feminist and anti-Nazi views and keeps on visiting her time and again. She is more like a spokesperson of Hariharan giving a new edge to the plot -

Meena names things with ferocious certainty. Communalist fundamentalist, these women warriors seem to know exactly which cities they want to raze to the ground, which they want to raise in their place. (60)

The Prof. Shiv’s character most unexpectedly happens to share some shades of the academic life of famous historian Romila Thapar (the Emeritus Professor of Ancient Indian History at JNU) because it echoes of the controversy around her NCERT textbooks (*Ancient India* and *Medieval India*) in the late 70s which also marks the beginning of the battle over history. Much like Prof. Shiv’s lesson on Basava, her textbooks were also accused of not portraying the Aryans as indigenous and ancient India as a glorious Golden Age of great Aryan culture, with the features like high spirituality and unmatched social harmony. She was also castigated for her questioning of Sanskrit sources and orthodox opinions in respect of caste (*Shudras*), worship of cows, beef-eating etc. in Aryan times. She was further blamed by religious organizations and cultural groups for not depicting Muslims as tormenters and invaders on the holy Indian soil and not doing enough justice and glorification while writing about regional heroes like Maratha warrior Shivaji and religious preachers such as Guru Nanak Sahib. In the same vein, Professor Shiv’s lesson has to face the ire a Hindu watchdog group which lays blame that “Professor Murthy has distorted historical fact. He has tainted the glory of the model Hindu kingdom of Vijaynagar. He has underplayed the villainous Muslim sacking of Vijaynagar city” (Hariharan 156-157). In the wake of Romila Thapar’s textbook controversy, “Marxist Imprints”, “Saffronising”, and “Historical Revisionism” became the buzzing words in the realm of Indian intelligentsia. Political parties, officials and vigilant groups lobbied against her texts and demanded immediate ban. Since then, she has time and again been accused of being biased, “anti-Hindu and anti-Indian and traitor to the nation” (Thapar *The History* 96) and she even alleged of receiving death-threats from her opponents.

Romila Thapar is known for advocating for the legitimacy of logical and independent interpretations of Indian History rather than succumbing to the ambivalent nationalist & colonial interpretations, preconceptions and orthodox opinions about Indian past. Her views about the true nature of historiography explain well the framework adopted by Prof. Shiv in his critique of Basava’s legend, myth and history. She says:

Professional historical writing requires a critical enquiry that includes the application of historical methodology, assessing the reliability of evidence and drawing on logical argument in making casual connections. It differentiates between the invention of a narrative that fantasizes about the past and an interpretation that attempts to critically analyze the evidence. History is not an arbitrary narrative where myth can override facts. (Thapar *Propaganda*)

Like Romila Thapar, Prof. Shiv, through his fundamental assumptions, registers conformity with the practice of excluding the half-baked and imaginary legends, folktales and myths from the official version of history texts. He believes in pulling the blurred blend of history and myth apart in order to judge the facticity of myths and authenticity of Basava's historical discourse. He states:

Wading through the numerous contradictory accounts of basava's life means parting several meeting rivers. Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth, pulling apart history and legend. Deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earthbound; which slivers of myth will cast light and insight on dull historical fragments. (Hariharan 87)

Thus, the main incidents of *In Times of Siege* have a lot to do with the rethinking of historical occurrences through the specs of opinionated politics or dogmatic cultural preconceptions. The background of the controversy in the plot appears as inspired from a similar incident related to the protestations that happened against H.S. Shivprakash's famous Kannad play *Mahachaitra* (1994) based on the life and times of Basava (also famous as Basaveshwa). In the play, he had sought to portray the god-like saint in the form of a human being – the one who encouraged the active involvement of the poor and the oppressed in the reformation movement - without adhering to the conventional path of viewing him as an *Avatar*. The playwright and the play became the target of the attack by an organization named Basava Dal and its single-minded woman chief Mata Mahadevi who launched a fierce campaign. The campaign had certain add-ons like burning of copies, violent demonstrations, burning effigies, and attempt for self-immolations by young Lingayats. As the controversy assumed the great proportions, so, an order was issued by the contemporary government to the concerned universities to withdraw the play from the syllabi with the immediate effect. But the certain academic bodies refused to implement the order as they reckoned it as a

violation of their autonomy. Later, the matter went into court where the State High Court upheld the autonomy of the universities and passed the judgment that creative work of literature are not meant to be banned or withdrawn in that way.

So, playwright Shivprakash in the play is portrayed as professor Shivmurthy and like the controversial play, the lesson also incites the untoward protestations from Hindu fundamentalists, especially a cultural group called *Ithihas Suraksha Manch* (self-acclaimed Protectors of History), that try to terrorize him by resorting to “all kinds of bullying tactics”. They object to the fact that Prof. Shiv hasn’t “made the heroes heroic enough” and has “made the villains too villainous” (Hariharan 55). Myths and historical facts are intermingled in their popular perception of Basava as they believe of him someone akin to god and so, they project Shiv’s analysis of the poet as a distortion and tampering of “precious and glorious Indian history” (76) and historical figures. They threaten him of grave consequences to his academic career and destroy his life if he doesn’t succumb to their three specific demands:

Firstly apology for hurting their sentiments, separate apologies from Shiv, department and by extension the university. Secondly, the lesson to get retracted. Thirdly, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Munch. (69)

Intimidating groups like *Ithihas Suraksha Manch* gets the validation of their ideological agenda from divisive forces lurking in our socio-cultural and religious institutions. Even people from academia are often found to be advancing their schema through overt/overt support in the garb of protecting and upholding country’s golden history, culture and tradition. The nexus of divisive forces and intelligentsia gets exemplified in the relationship of the Manch with Shiv’s own colleague Dr. Arya and the retired professor and historian A.A. Atre. Professor Atre’s reservations, in the context, speak more than enough when he disapproves of the lesson on Basava:

Texts which over emphasize caste divisions and project the Hindu religion and Hindu culture in a poor light should not be allowed. Such conspiracies to tarnish the image of the Indian past should be met with courage. People feel free to revile Hinduism with impunity, but they do not dare criticize Islam, because then the swords would be out” (Hariharan 99-100)

A colleague of professor Shiv, the “big wig” Dr. Arya, also professes his divisive agenda venomously. When Professor Shiv is called for a panel discussion on the controversial lesson, Dr. Arya glances at him in the manner of “a hawk waiting to swoop down on a delectable mouse” (116). He tries to make the situation even worse for the professor. His “face looks

bloated as if he has been feasting on Shiv's misery.... No wonder Arya was an unexpected accomplice; he wanted the meeting so he could gloat in public over the Manch's new victim" (125).

The novel unerringly amplifies the current Indian milieu where headlines of such kind often becomes the focal point when debates on political framing of the school/university curriculum, scholarly discipline, unjustified censorship in art and cinema, academic unrest and echoing dissent in universities, distorting, challenging and questioning of myths and historical narratives have been dominating the scene. The issue of academic censorship becomes more than obvious in the novel when prof. Shiv's own department takes a stand against him and tries to force an apology out of him to pacify the anger of the concerned fundamentalist group.

They seek to undermine the heterogeneous culture and heritage of the nation and project their repressive agenda of intolerance through violent outbursts *In Times of Siege* exposes how politics of ideology has always been a potent way mobilizing un-official historical and mythical discourse and narratives prevalent in the modern day India. Political overtones of the book become evident when we find a conscientious professor pitted against the ruthless forces of bigotry, communalism, fanaticism and narrow-mindedness embodied by the group *Ithihas Suraksha Manch*. The demanding the subtraction of Shiv's lesson shows how the forces of such kind aim at creating uproar by endorsing the fabricated hurt to their religious and cultural assumptions. They desire hegemony for having the remote control of the historical imagination of academic institutions to sanction a culturally-controlled version of history and myths in national curriculum.towards minorities. Madhav Sadashiv, one of the spokesperson of the *Ithihas Suraksha Manch* asserts their vehement quest for dominance over minorities through a warning that:

Foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt Hindu culture and language, learn to respect and hold in reverence the Hindu religion and must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation. (Hariharan 100)

These protesters, besides wreaking violence also contribute as segregationists. Through their propaganda, they fire up the religious sentiments for causing chaos around. They justify their agenda of fundamentalism and policy of vandalism by some weird logic as:

If the Muslims can have their fundamentalists why can't we? Have we forgotten that Hindus have stood the test of time like no one else? Our fundamentalists have been around longer than theirs have. So we have to show the world we are superior to them in every way (135).

Through their insidious role in the system of control and coercion, they target the liberal discourse through informal policing. Like many of their kind, they dodge reasonable debates and open dialogue. When the hired agitators (on Dr. Arya's instruction) raid the professor's room to destroy the belongings in an aggressive way, the novelist specifies their terrible act thus: "the tables and chairs and book shelves are broken, the wall defaced. There are torn books everywhere, cupboard and files open-minded and shambled" (131). There are "shards of glass and splinters of wood mingling with the remains of his books and file. The legacy of vandals. The spaces vandals have pillaged and violated lie across the vast stretches of history doomed to desolation" (151). She refers to them as "blood-thirsty munchies - will break and devour everything" (135).

Hariharan's depiction of the controversy mongers' crusade for correction of syllabi, censorship and vandalism in campuses, can be well understood in the context of a recent hullabaloo of cutting off an essay named *300 Ramayana: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation*, by famous writer A. K. Ramanujan from the B.A. History (Honors) course in Delhi University in 2011 just because of the pressure exerted by a pro-Hindu student wing called ABVP. A gang of students from this wing allegedly resorted to the politics of vandalism as they stormed into the Department of History at the University for the purpose of infusing fear in the teachers and staff. Later, the university did succumb to their demands and applied the formula of self-censorship by suppressing the essay. A similar case occurred with the famous author Rohinton Mistry who also became the centre of a row in 2010 when his prize-winning book 'Such a Long Journey' was subtracted from the Mumbai University syllabus after some objections from a political organization that is famous for resorting to violence for intimidation. In the wake of this controversy, Mistry himself said, "Mumbai University has come perilously close to institutionalising the ugly notion of self-censorship." Sometimes, self-censorship by educational institutions takes a different dimension altogether as happened in the case of Universities of Madras. In february 2014, two short-stories (*Thunbakkeni* and *Ponnagaram* respectively) written by Pudumaipithan, also known as the father of modern Tamil story-story, were excluded from the syllabus of the undergraduate courses by the Academic Council of the University of Madras. The reason was

given that the stories depict the exploitation and sexual abuse of the Dalit women, so, their reading might be an embarrassment for the Dalit students.

To neutralize the bigoted aggression of an obscure fundamentalist group, Prof. Shiv makes his mind up to take “a stand of resistance” (Hariharan 198) with the help of well-intended friends, colleagues, Meena and her activist comrades. At this critical moment of academic career when his own department fails him and his tranquil life turns on its head, Meena stands with Shiv to provide much-needed support and also involves her activist friends and committed comrades to deal with the untoward circumstances. Activist Meena’s character serves as a kind of catalyst Professor Shiv when he finds himself being pushed to the wall in the struggle for power and space. So here, the centre-margin paradigm gets faithfully reflected in the tussle between two diverse discourses on history. Meena is instrumental for introducing counter discourse to the fundamentalist one. She is the spokesperson of the current generation with liberal vent who shows some guts in fight against the so called “protectors of Indian history”. Her listing of these perpetrators includes:

Fundoo, fundamentalist. Fascist. Obscurantist. Terrorist. And the made in-India brand, the communalist - a deceptively innocuous - sounding name for professional other community haters. (57)

Following her counsel, the professor chooses to “shed his accursed shyness” and take the fight to the opposition camp - neither apologizing to the fundamentalist group nor taking the disputed lesson back. She is the one who gives him nerve to face the situation unflinchingly and defend his viewpoint sturdily. This gives professor a stature like that of hero because of his positive determination. Shiv’s reaction to shield his standpoint gives birth to an animated academic debate over the validation and misappropriation of the past. Meena, with her all available resources, enthusiastically help to mobilizing quite a few citizens’ groups to counter the bigoted discourse against the professor and simultaneously, Shiv also seeks to draw emotional sustenance from his freedom fighter father’s visionary wisdom and his own *Spiritus Mundi*.

So, the book representatively covers what has truly gone wrong with the history that is being taught in schools and universities. It argues how our history textbooks are often been the result of vacillation between the perpetuated pious myths or distorted colonial interpretations of past. By putting Basava’s narrative at the centre, Hariharan shows why we considerably lack the kind of history textbooks that aim at contributing to the Indian students’ nuanced understanding of their history and heritage through well-researched,

rational and facts-based interpretations and investigations. She disapproves of the “crude glorification of anything pre-modern and traditional” (Hariharan 141). Her book questions the opinions of those who resort to the politics of vigilantism and vandalism in the garb of protecting the culture & upholding the nationalism and believes that all allegedly “offending passages” from Indian history textbooks are meant to be corrected for accomplishing the mission of revamping the educational system.

Thus, Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* while narrating the hullabaloo in the life of a history professor, has stripped naked the unhealthy historical perspective of the masses and fissures of historiography in India. Besides arguing on the controversial discourse of Basava with a reference to the politics of vigilantism and censorship in academic institutions, the novel pinpoints why India’s majority is terribly afraid of its own history. She says this is, a fear of history. A fear that our history will force people to see that our past, like our present, has always had critics of social divisions that masquerade as religion and tradition. So what do these frightened people do? They whitewash historical figures, they seize history ...” (Hariharan 97-98)

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